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About *Memoria*(Memory)

Bibiana Suárez
DePaul University

Abstract.

Memoria(Memory) is an installation that uses a game format, in this case the card game *Memory* (Milton Bradley). For those that may not remember, *Memory* is a board game where players work at remembering the placement of matching pairs of picture cards. Through this device, I discuss the impact that Latinos have had in the cultural and political landscape of the U.S. since WWII.

Memoria(Memory) was shown at the Hyde Park Center¹ in Chicago, December 11, 2011–March 25, 2012. It consists of fifty-four pairs or a hundred-eight “cards”, 23.5 x 23.5 in., made from aluminum panels that are repeated in a grid, just like in the actual *Memory* game. The layout is intended to imply a game in process with some cards turned face up and others unturned. The west wall in HPAC’s gallery represented the main grid of the game. The north and south walls of the gallery displayed pairs of cards that simulated those found by two “players”.

The announcement in 2003 that Latinos had become the largest group within the minority populations of the United States was the catalyst that moved me to work on this project. This moment created an opportunity to trace and comment on the contributions that Latinos have made to the historical and cultural landscape of the U.S. I thought to provide also an opportunity for Latinos to look back and remember where we have been in order to understand where we are now and trace a path towards an increasingly productive future in this country. For this reason, my primary goal was to utilize a pictorial strategy that would attract viewers to the exhibition space and invite them to ask questions about their own involvement in this history.

Early on in my practice I sensed that viewers were not fully engaging with the content of my work. I understood then that I needed to find a way to quiet any apprehension they might feel about a visual project that dealt with identity issues. That is when I came up with the idea to use what I call the aesthetics of games to draw viewers into a dialogue with my art. The *Memory* game, where players are asked to remember the placement of identical picture cards offered an interesting format to call and recall viewers, to concentrate and remember the interwoven histories between Latinos of different origins and mainstream culture.

By using the phrase “the aesthetic of games”, I mean how I utilize the design aspects of the game, its rules and the formal qualities of the images it employs. For example, the same number of squared cards with rounded edges that characterize the actual *Memory* game appeared in my “game”. Also, when playing *Memory*, all cards are placed face down in a grid format. Two or more players play and each player takes a turn lifting two cards at a time, trying to find pairs. Cards that cannot be matched are put back face down and remain on the grid. In my installation, the grid the panels made on the walls of the gallery was not perfectly aligned. This happens in the actual *Memory* game, but in *Memoria*(Memory), I used this aspect to allude to the fluidity of memory, time, history and identity. Moreover, in the actual *Memory* game, the back of each card has a simple design of repeated dots. Likewise, in *Memoria*(Memory) there were panels or “cards” that appeared as if they were face down and have a pattern. Instead of dots, the pattern I created on these cards consist of repeated combinations of thirty-nine names that Latinos use amongst ourselves and with each other, plus the word “Yo” (“I”), the word “Gringo” and the word “Other”. The text panels that are interspersed between cards with images that are face up are for me a *clave* or key that points to what is at the core of this work. It alludes to the interwoven histories between Latinos of varied origins with each other and with mainstream USA that have lead us at times to amicable exchanges and at other times antagonistic ones. Finally, another aspect of the *Memory* game that I alter is that in *Memoria*(Memory) most pairs of “cards” are not identical. This subtle variation and subsequent comparison of the “matched” pair is meant to elicit a conversation about two sides of an issue.

In *Memoria*(Memory) I focus on Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Cubans, the three groups with the longest history in the U.S., and with whom I have interacted the most. Latin Americans from all countries, but especially from Mexico and the Caribbean, have been immigrating to this country since the 19th century but I chose to begin my investigation with the *Bracero* Program because, in my estimation, this is when a concern for Latino issues becomes more prominent in the U.S.

Bracero translates as “manual laborer”. This was a program initiated by the U.S. government in 1942 that allowed Mexicans to enter this country with working permits to replace American workers that had gone to war, especially in the agricultural industry. The program ended in 1964. According to the United Farm Workers organization², over four million Mexicans came to work in the US through

that program. The shortages in the work force in the US during the war coincided with failed policies instituted by the Mexican government after the 1910 revolution that took away resources for farm workers in that country. For this reason, they welcomed the opportunity to work in the U.S. According to Deborah Cohen in *Braceros*³, the Mexican government, which was not involved in the war, saw the program as a way to contribute to the Allies' efforts. Skilled agricultural workers from important agricultural regions in Mexico came by train to processing posts such as El Paso, Texas, where they acquired working permits

to a Latino "community"? As Lucy Lippard expresses in her book *Mixed Blessings*⁶ with regards to the multicultural debate in the 90's, we still lack a "theory of multiplicity". By showing multiple positions with regards to the experience of *Latinidad*, I hope to offer viewers with a more expansive definition and in so doing dispel a number of misconceptions about who we are.

Inspired by the work of Arlene Dávila in *Latinos Inc.* and *Latino Spin*⁷, I looked at how Latino culture has been marketed by the U.S. mainstream, but also by Latinos



Bibiana Suárez, *Memoria(Memory)*, west wall installation view, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 2011-2012, photography by Tom Van Eynde

and were assigned to a job location. *Memoria(Memory)* includes images that document the precarious conditions under which Mexican immigrant workers worked and lived during this program. In this way, I am providing viewers with an opportunity to remember and/or learn about this past with the hope that it will inform their thinking about recent political debates over the presence of illegal workers in the U.S.

My exploration of immigration issues in *Memoria(Memory)* is not confined to the Mexican community. I allude also to the experiences of different generations of Cubans, such as the first wave of Cuban immigrant children that came through the *Pedro Pan*⁴ (Peter Pan) project, the second wave of Cuban immigrants through the Mariel port in 1980 and last, the third wave during the *Balseros* crisis in 1990. I refer as well to the migration of Puerto Ricans starting in 1947 through "*Operación Manos a la Obra*" (Operation Bootstrap)⁵.

Latinidad or *Latinismo* is a concept first used by sociologist Felix Padilla to refer to the pan-ethnic alliances that Latinos of different origins created in order to improve conditions that affected all groups without regard to national and regional differences. While the all-encompassing *Latinismo* has helped us create an umbrella denomination that unites us on socio-political issues, at the same time, it has been misunderstood by some as an indicator that Latinos are all the same. Like many other immigrant populations in this country, the question still remains for us - how do we maintain our individual cultural core and still contribute

themselves. That is because to me that marketing is indicative of changing paradigms that over time have led to conceptions and misconceptions of *Latinidad*. It also conjures mixed messages about Latinos' consumption power and their visibility in the mainstream. For example, while some U.S. fruit companies capitalize on the exoticism attributed to the tropics in their marketing of tropical fruits as healthy and riveting in taste, they hide the low wages and poor working conditions they offer in their plantations in Latin America. Paradoxically, Latino owned companies appear to "whiten" their products so that they may become more desirable to the mainstream market.

In *Memoria(Memory)* I employed different kinds of images and media. That is because I believe that images from different media sources, be it an archival photograph, one on the label of a mango juice can or another from an instructional manual, each send messages to us in a different way. We construct information from the amalgamation of these messages, so images are an important way in which we acquire and assemble knowledge about ourselves and others. On the other hand, we often innocently and unconsciously absorb negative messages hidden in the image. Like Michael Harris in *Colored Pictures*⁸, I want to critique these "dangerous images" that distort the process of identity formation and promote the normalization of stereotypes.

In doing my research for *Memoria(Memory)*, one of the first theoretical works that I encountered was the work of Frances Aparicio, in particular her essay "On Sub-Versive Signifiers: Tropicalizing Language in the US"⁹. In this piece,

Aparicio discusses “code switching” (or the intentional switch from Spanish to English (or vice-versa) in one conversation) as a way for Latinos to infuse language with “newly invested meanings” in part to oppose their cultural subordination. I looked for examples of code switching in language, which I translated to a kind of visual code switching. For example signage with phrases like “*Se Habla Inglés*” interested me as signifiers of lingual and cultural reaffirmation, in this case that of Cubans in Miami, that interact with English speakers on their own terms. I also gave visual form to the kinds of code switching that appear in Latino popular music such as *reggaeton*, which as I see it, exemplify the inventiveness that Aparicio refers to.

Finally, the space of reflection that *Memoria* (Memory) constituted as a gallery installation, became active in the smaller facsimile version of the installation that we produced as an actual game and that we played with different constituencies in the gallery, but also at schools and at the Institute for Puerto Rican Arts and Culture (IPRAC) in Humboldt Park. These interactions provided opportunities to promote discussion amongst the players. As the exhibition travels to other venues I hope that more viewers will come out and play, concentrate, remember and ultimately learn more about *our* history.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Located at 5020 South Cornell Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60615; 773.324.5520 and www.hydeparkart.org. The Hyde Park Art Center is a not-for-profit organization that presents innovative exhibitions; primarily work by Chicago-area artists, and educational programs in the visual arts for children and adults of diverse backgrounds.
- 2 <http://www.farmworkers.org/hp091047.html>
- 3 Cohen, Deborah, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*, 2011, The University of North Carolina Press.
- 4 The *Pedro Pan* project was an initiative conducted by the Catholic Church and the CIA between December 1960 and October 1962, to bring children out of Cuba for fear that they would be indoctrinated or that their parents would lose their parental rights under Castro's ruling. For more information see Maria de los Angeles Torres' *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2003.
- 5 “*Operación Manos a la Obra*” or Operation Bootstrap consisted of a number of initiatives developed by the Puerto Rican government in 1948 to industrialize Puerto Rico and resolve problems the Island faced regarding overpopulation and poverty.
- 6 Lippard, Lucy, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1990.
- 7 Dávila, Arlene, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of*

a People, University of California Press, 2001 and *Latino spin: Public Image and The Whitewashing of Race*, New York University Press, 2008.

- 8 Harris, Michael, *Colored pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- 9 In Aparicio's book with Susana Chávez-Silverman, *Tropicalizations: Transcultural RePresentations of Latinidad*, Dartmouth College, 1997.

BIBIANA SUAREZ is Professor of Art in the Department of Art, Media and Design at DePaul University (Chicago). She is also a graduate faculty in the MFA in Studio Arts program at Maryland Institute College of Art (Baltimore). Suárez was born and raised in Puerto Rico, but has resided in Chicago since 1980. She has a BFA (1984) and an MFA (1989) in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Suárez has exhibited extensively in the United States as well as in Puerto Rico and Mexico. Her solo exhibitions include *Memoria* (Memory) at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago (2011-2012); *Domino/Dominó* at El Museo del Barrio, New York (1998) and the Illinois Arts Gallery, Chicago (1999); *De Pico a Pico (Beak to Beak-Face to Face)* at Sazama Gallery, Chicago (1993); *Island Adrift: The Puerto Rican Identity in Exile* at Taller Puertorriqueño, Philadelphia (1993); *In Search of an Island* also at Sazama Gallery (1991) and *A Grafito* at the Art Students league in San Juan, Puerto Rico (1985).

Among her group exhibitions are: 1998: *DIWA Arts, Rene J. Marquez, María Matinez-Cañas and Bibiana Suárez* at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (1998) and *Puerto Rican Equation* at Hunter College (1998) in New York; *Second Sight: Printmaking in Chicago, 1935-1995* at the Mary Leigh Block Gallery of Northwestern University in Chicago (1996); *National Drawing Invitational*, The Arkansas Art Center in Little Rock (1992); *In the Heart of the Country/ En el corazón del país*, The Chicago Cultural Center (1991); *Adivina! Chicago Latino Expressions* at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in Chapultepec, Mexico City (1998) and *Expresiones Hispanas*, a two-year traveling exhibition (1988-89) that begun at the Mexican Cultural Institute in San Antonio.

Suárez's awards includes three Illinois Arts Council Individual Visual Artist Fellowship Awards (1991, 1994, 1999) and an Arts Midwest/NEA Regional Visual Arts Fellowship (1992). She was the inaugural recipient of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture's (University of Chicago) Artist in Residence Fellowship in 2003-2004, and received a Center for Latino Research Faculty Fellowship in 2011-2012, at DePaul University.